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XULAnexUS

Volume 9 | Issue 2

Article 3

4-1-2012

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Recommended Citation

Hubbard, Shanti Gina (2012) "Does Absence Make the Heart Grow Fonder? Missing Your Partner and Sexual Activity," *XULAnexUS*: Vol. 9 : Iss. 2 , Article 3.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.xula.edu/xulanexus/vol9/iss2/3>

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Volume 9, Issue 2, April 2012. Research Manuscript. 18-23.
<<http://xulanexus.xula.edu/textpattern/index.php?id=137>>



Shanti Hubbard is a Psychology, Pre-Medicine major with a minor in Philosophy from Compton, CA. After graduation in 2014, Hubbard plans to attend graduate school to get a Ph.D. in Clinical Psychology or Counseling Psychology. Hubbard presented her research at the Annual Psychology Symposium and is most interested in the study of romantic relationships. She wants to study what attracts couples, keeps them together, and forces them apart in an attempt to use her research to reduce divorce rates in modern society.

Does Absence Make the Heart Grow Fonder? Missing Your Partner and Sexual Activity

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Abstract

This study measured the correlation between sexual activity and the amount one misses a partner in long distance relationships. Past research has looked at the failures and benefits of being in long distance relationships. Xavier University of Louisiana psychology students were asked to take two surveys that measured both the sense of missing towards their partner and the level of sexual activity with their partner. It was not found that sexual activity positively correlated to missing. However, it seems that intimacy is an important factor in how much partners miss each other.

Key Terms:

- Sexual Activity
- Missing
- Long Distance Relationships

“Distance is not for the fearful, it is for the bold. It's for those who are willing to spend a lot of time alone in exchange for a little time with the one they love. It's for those knowing a good thing when they see it, even if they don't see it nearly enough...” –Anonymous

The number of college students involved in long distance relationships seems to be much higher today than in the past. There are more people attending college, sometimes having to leave their partners at home. In fact, according to USA Today (Jayson, 2010) 75% of college students are in a long distance relationship. According to Duck (1991), there are also other factors that force a relationship to become long distance, such as the partner's job. Today, it seems that due to the many technological advances distance should be easier to deal with. For example, Skype and Oovoo, gives someone the ability to video chat with their partner no matter the physical distance between them. There are also cell phones that allow someone to communicate with their partner at any time through talking or texting. However, even with the new advances in technology, being away from a partner can still be very hard on the relationship.

Long distance relationships seem to require more work to make sure that the relationship flourishes. To be successful, they require a lot of work, the level of commitment must initially be strong, and partners must be able to adjust to circumstances. Maguire and Kinney (2010) found that the higher the stress levels in a long distance relationship, the more in jeopardy the relationship seemed to be. Pistole (2010) found that, partners have to adjust their initial goals and expectations in order to adapt to the new expectations required of them in the long distance relationship. If they do not have a strong commitment, the new demands could end up terminating their relationship. When couples are separated for long periods of time how much they

value the relationship and how much effort they really put in it are important in making the relationship last (Adams & Jones, 1999). Also, Cameron and Ross (2007) looked at how partners felt about the future, their self-esteem level, and how susceptible they are to experience depression and/or anxiety to measure the stability of a long distance relationship. Other negative factors associated with long distance relationships may include the more “investments” each partner needs to make into the relationship such as travel time, constant communication, and the finances required to see the partner relatively often (Pistole, Roberts, & Mosko, 2010).

While there are quite a few negative aspects to being in a long distance relationship, there are some positives as well. According to Roberts and Pistole (2009), partners who do not live together have higher satisfaction rates, most likely because they only show their good side when they do get to see their partner. They go the extra mile to make sure their partner is happy in the time they have allotted to see each other. Also, according to Duck (1991), those in a long distance relationship appear to be happier when they spend less time talking about their feelings towards each other and more about what is going on in their daily lives. Research shows that it is more important to share the daily activities of everyday life because the other partner is not around to physically witness what is occurring (Duck, 1991). Therefore, they need to feel more connected to their partner through communication. It seems that when a couple has to participate in a long distance relationship (i.e. due to employment reasons), they work that much harder to be able to see their partner and spend as much time with them as possible.

When it comes to actually defining *missing* someone, it can be quite difficult. There are many ways a person can express how they miss someone, what they do to show it, and how long it

actually takes before they truly get the “feeling” of missing their partner. “Feelings, behaviors and cognition” are needed to accurately define missing someone (Le et al., 2008, p. 527). Partners could feel sad and/or lonely. They could constantly call their partner, and also think about their partner all the time. Also, as noted by Pistole and Roberts (2011), the way a person defines their relationship (not dating, casual, regular, steady dating, married, or previously married), is important in seeing how important the relationship is to that person. Pistole et al. (2010) found that attachment and caregiving most influenced relational satisfaction, which in turn influenced commitment. Looking at these findings it would seem that the higher the satisfaction, the more a person would miss their partner because they want that feeling that comes with the partner being around. Conversely, the lower the satisfaction the less likely they are to miss their partner, and it’s more likely that the relationship will end. Wilmont, Carbaugh, and Baxter (1985) conducted a study about terminating long distance relationships, and they found that those who decided to mutually end the relationship had fewer regrets about the break up. This likely meant they were not completely satisfied and how much they missed their partner no longer gave enough weight in determining if they should hold on to the relationship.

The degree of sexual activity in a relationship also seems to be an important factor in terms of the overall relational satisfaction. Adams and Jones (1999) listed several sexual behaviors that are most common in relationships, which included: holding hands, kissing, fondling with clothes on/off, oral sex, and sexual intercourse. The behaviors a couple participates in could possibly be linked to the amount of commitment they feel in the relationship. For example, a couple who only holds hands may not have established the level of trust as a couple who has sexual intercourse. Another possibility could be that sexual intercourse is a way for them to express their love for each other while kissing is seen as more affectionate and intimate (Adams &

Jones, 1999). Because some couples use sex as a way to express their love, there is a possibility that they could get frustrated or even sad that they cannot express their love to their long distance partner in the way that they want. This frustration and/or sadness can be interpreted to mean that they miss their partner and the farther they are, the more likely that those feelings will increase (Le et al., 2008).

The present study will examine the role of sexual activity in how much a couple will miss each other while in a long distance relationship. Previous research has looked at long distance relationships. However, research has not investigated how much sexual activity will affect a person in a long distance relationship, specifically regarding how much they miss their partner. I hypothesize that for college students in a long distance relationship, increased sexual activity will be related to partners missing each other more.

Method

Participants

Thirty male and female students from Xavier University of Louisiana’s Psychology Department subject pool participated in this study. All participants were in a relationship for at least two months, and their partner lived at least one city away. Unfortunately, one participant’s results had to be dropped due to apparent acquiescence (a subject’s lack of true involvement in the survey, such as answering a question without actually reading it). Participants were given extra credit in a psychology course for completing the study.

Materials

To measure sense of missing, I used the questions designed by Le et al. (2008) modifying the survey from 77 questions to 53 questions with answers ranging from 1 to 7, 1 being “extremely atypical feature of missing a romantic partner” and 7 being “extremely typical feature of missing a romantic partner”. A sample item is, “Looking at

things that remind you of your partner.” Scores can range from 53 to 371. Higher numbers indicate a greater sense of missing.

To measure sexual activity, I used the sexual activity items found in Adams and Jones (1999). This is a 6-item survey with answers ranging from N/A (0) to 7. N/A is an option that means they do not participate in the specific sexual activity at all, and 7 means they participate in it extremely often. A sample item is, “Kissing.” Scores can range from 0 to 42. Higher numbers indicate the sexual activity is done more frequently.

Procedure

This study is correlational. During each trial, participants arrived in groups to specifically assigned classrooms. They were given two copies of an informed consent form. Participants signed both copies and returned one. Then, they took two questionnaires measuring their “feelings” when separated from their partner and how much the partners participate in different sexual activities when they are together. After taking the two surveys, they returned them and were given a debriefing form.

Results

To test my hypothesis I conducted a correlational analysis. Unfortunately, using Pearson’s correlation, no significant relationship was found between missing and sexual activity, $r(29)=.079$, $p=.343$ thereby showing that the level of sexual activity does not predict the sense of missing. More specifically, I looked at the correlations between missing and holding hands $r(29)=.287$, $p=.066$, kissing $r(29)=.210$, $p=.13$, fondling with clothes on $r(29)=.051$, $p=.396$, and oral sex $r(29)=.031$, $p=.403$. While none of these associations were statistically significant, the correlation between holding hands and missing approaches significance.

Discussion

I hypothesized that for college students in a long distance relationship, increased sexual activity will be related to partners missing each other more. I expected a positive relationship between sexual activity and missing, but it was not supported by my data. However, even though my hypothesis was not supported, I did discover other interesting information. There was a marginal relationship between holding hands and missing. This could indicate that the important factor in a relationship is not the level of sexual activity but rather the level of intimacy that makes the partners miss each other more. Holding hands might show more intimacy than other intimate activities.

Due to the non-significant correlation of sexual activity to missing, sexual activity might not be important in the experience of missing. However, partners who are more intimate seem to miss each other more. Therefore, partners in long distance relationships could work on their level of intimacy to build stronger relationships. A few suggested ways they could do this would be to hold hands more, spend more time around each other simply talking about their day to day activities (Duck, 1991), and even by going to the park and watching the sun set together.

There are some limitations to this study. The only participants were Xavier University of Louisiana psychology students. This could be a problem because the results may not be applicable to a college student attending a predominately white institution. Because partners had to be in a relationship for at least two months it could be possible that this was not enough time to feel attached to their partner. Finally, the partner had to be at least one city away. However, the two cities may be adjacent to each other (e.g. New Orleans, Louisiana and Metairie, Louisiana), and it is possible that this is not far enough to be considered a long distance relationship.

With further research, it is possible that my hypothesis could be supported. Future research could have married couples take the surveys because they have been in a relationship longer and have a stronger sense of commitment and attachment. Also, other college students and students with different majors could be used for better external validity. Finally, future research could survey older adults in long distance relationships because they would more likely be more serious about the relationship than most college students. With the increase in the number of long distance relationships, further research would be very helpful in making those relationships more successful.

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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dr. Hammer and the Psychology department for their assistance in making this research a success.



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